FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
DECEMBER 15, 2002

BORN TO SET THY PEOPLE FREE
John M. Buchanan

Without abandoning all hope that things may yet take a turn for the better, I must now write you a Christmas letter. We shall both experience a few dark hours...we shall be assailed by questions of why...and then, just when everything is bearing down on us the Christmas message comes. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us...Christ is with us. Dearest Maria, let us celebrate Christmas in that way. Don't entertain any imaginings of me in my cell, but remember that Christ, too, frequents prisons, and that he will not pass me by.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Love Letters from Cell 92
December 13, 1943

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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BORN TO SET THY PEOPLE FREE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 1:6-8
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

"He has sent me . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners."
Isaiah 61:1 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, once again with the truth and beauty of your love promised and given in Bethlehem. Open our hearts this day to that transforming and liberating love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the great stories to come out of the Second World War was the rescue and liberation in January of 1945 of 513 American and Allied prisoners of war, survivors of the Bataan Death March held in a prison camp in the Philippines. Those prisoners had about given up hope after three years of captivity in the most brutal of conditions. Many others had died during the long forced march. Many died of malnutrition and disease in the camp. Many were summarily executed. The survivors knew the probability of their being rescued and liberated was remote, to say the least. They weren't even sure anyone knew where they were.

Then on one amazing day in January 1945, 121 U.S. Rangers emerged from the jungle. They had been training for their mission for months. After a brief skirmish, the camp guards fled, and the gates were thrown open. When I read the passage from the sixty-first chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah that is being read in Christian churches all over the world today, the third Sunday of Advent—"He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners,"—I thought about that experience of liberation in our own history and others like it and how in all of human experience there is nothing quite as powerful, quite as utterly good and joyful, as being liberated.

A recent book about the event described it:

> Slowly, the awareness that this was a jailbreak was beginning to sink in among the rest of the prisoners. They were reacting with a kind of catatonic ecstasy, numb and inarticulate. One prisoner wrapped his arms around the neck of the first Ranger he saw and kissed him on the forehead. All he could he say was "Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy!" Alvie Robbins found one prisoner muttering in a darkened corner of one of the barracks, tears coursing down his face. "I thought we'd been forgotten," the prisoner said. "No, you're not forgotten," Robbins said. "We've come for you."

In the biblical passage, liberation released profound joy, laughter:

> a garland instead of ashes
> the oil of gladness instead of mourning (Isaiah 61:3)

The psalmist echoed:

> When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion . . .
> our mouth was filled with laughter.
> and our tongue with shouts of joy. (Psalm 126:1-2)

In the camp there were tears of joy and laughter.

"I was glad it was dark so he couldn't see my tears," Tommie Thomas remembered years later. The Rangers didn't know that the camp help prisoners from other nations: Norwegians, Canadians, Dutch, and British. After the camp was secured, a Ranger cried out, "You're free—all Americans assemble at the main gate!" To which one of the proper English prisoners yelled gleefully, "I'm not American, but shall I come too?"

With the help of many heroic Philippinos, the liberated prisoners, sick, weak, frail, made their way all the way back to the Allied lines. Finally they saw an American flag set in the turret of a tank. It wasn't much of a flag, but for the men it was galvanizing. Ralph Hibbs remembers that his heart stopped. It was the first Stars and Stripes he'd seen since the surrender three years earlier. "We wept openly, and we wept without shame" (Hampton Sides, *Ghost Soldiers*, pp. 238, 317).

They were free. They were home. They weren't forgotten at all.

One of the major ideas in the Bible is that when people are in dire circumstances, when people are in real trouble, when people have pretty much exhausted their own resources and concluded that there is no more hope, just when it appears that they are forgotten, utterly abandoned—just at that moment, God shows up. God hears their cries and comes to the rescue.

When God's people are in slavery in Egypt, God hears their cries and is moved and chooses Moses and sends Moses to Egypt on a mission.

"Go down, Moses," another people who were enslaved sang.

> Go down, Moses, to Egypt land.
> Say to ol' Pharaoh,
> "Let my people go."

So here we are on this third Sunday of Advent thinking about oppression, captivity, and liberation while the rest of the world out there is in a holiday mood with the cultural

celebration moving into high gear. Tomorrow is the single busiest day for the United States Post Office. More people will finish off and mail their Christmas cards this afternoon than on any other day. And here at Fourth Presbyterian Church, on Michigan Avenue, in one of the busiest and most profitable retail neighborhoods in the world, we have a front-row seat for the festivities just behind our own wonderful electric sheep, safely and quietly grazing in front of the Garth. It was barely safe out there yesterday, and it wasn't much better in here, what with three weddings and gift baskets and deliveries and parties, an all-day stream of visitors in the sanctuary and at the Social Service Center. I read somewhere that our retail neighbors will do 80 percent of the entire year's business during December, and a good chunk of that happens this weekend.

It's great to be a church in this place on this weekend. Never is the contrast between church and culture more dramatic. It's Christmas out there, but it is still very much Advent in here. You can hear Christmas carols in Water Tower Place; here we're singing "Watchmen Tell Us of the Night." With a delightful dedication bordering on grim determination, the sidewalks are full of shoppers. In here, we're almost hunkered down, asked to do serious introspection, invited to deal with serious ideas, invited to open our ears and minds to a love that can seriously transform us.

The Christian claim is not that the cultural celebration of Christmas is wrong, just misleading. The Christian claim that what is transpiring out there, while in many ways nice and in a lot of ways great fun, will not ultimately live up to its promises. It will not make us happy, fulfilled, or content for very long. It will surely not make us free, as anyone knows who sits in dread waiting for the January Visa bill to arrive.

The Christian claim is that the birth of the baby in Bethlehem is about that—releasing us from our prisons, our liberation from captivity.

It is as old as the Exile, that time six centuries before Christ when God's people were being held in captivity in Babylon and despairing that they would ever be free to go home. We read a lot about that time in Advent, from that part of the book of Isaiah that was actually a letter written to them.

> "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.
> Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

It's homecoming music, a sweet freedom song. The captivity is over.

That is what happened, by the way. The Persians defeated the Babylonians and the first thing they did was tell the Jewish exiles that they were free to go home, which they did, surely with ecstatic joy and laughter and tears. They returned, and as they did, the prophet urged them to "build up the ancient ruins, raise up the devastation, repair the ruined cities."

That is also a basic Christian claim: that our freedom in Christ is for something—for building up, repairing, restoring; that our salvation is for the purpose of rebuilding the world. Think of the amazing energy for positive change, the good of humankind, that has been released by the event we celebrate at Christmas: St. Francis of Assisi and his work that still teaches us about the prison of poverty; Mother Theresa; Nelson Mandela; Jimmy Carter, forgoing a richly deserved retirement of golf and lucrative consulting with multinational corporations to build houses with Habitat for Humanity and work for peace, out of his deeply rooted Christian faith; Martin Luther King—is there a better moment in American history and in the history of the human liberation than King at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, quoting the old slave song, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we're free at last"?

And so part of what we do in these days of preparation and anticipation is identify the prisons that hold us. That seems a peculiar thing to say, doesn't it? We don't think of ourselves as captives. To the contrary—we are free of most of the prisons that hold most of the other people of the world: political oppression, hunger, poverty, ignorance.

In an Advent essay, Cornelius Plantinga writes:

> I'm thinking that when life is good, our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint. We whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can't quite hear them. 'Thy kingdom come' we pray and hope it won't. . . . When our kingdom has had a good year, we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom. When life is good, redemption doesn't sound so good." (*Christian Century,* 14 December 2000)

So part of the reason we're in Advent and not yet Christmas, part of the reason we're singing Advent hymns about "mourning in lonely exile" instead of "Joy to the World! The Lord is come" is because the wisdom of the ages is that we need, more than we know, to acknowledge our need for the gift of love that came at Bethlehem, to confess it, and name it.

And so let's ask the uncomfortable question: Who among us isn't in some kind of captivity this morning? Who isn't aware deeply in their soul that there are forces that hem them in, restrict and confine them, keep them from the fullness of life, the life God has given them to live?

The Advent promise is that God will come specifically to where we are being held captive and invite us out into our freedom.

The captivity of illness, for instance—chronic, frightening, and debilitating; the promise is that God will come with peace and assurance and courage. The captivity of guilt, for instance. You can't believe what you've done. You've disappointed yourself and everyone who loves you, if they knew. You can't believe anyone could understand, let alone forgive you. Well, there is one who understands and forgives and will come to your prison and lift the load and invite you to be free.

The captivity of anger—the opposite of guilt, because you have been wronged and offended and you can't stop resenting and living out your anger. Anger is a strong prison. The whole world waited with fear and trembling for the anger of black South Africans at their oppression, their suffering under apartheid, to be expressed. The term *bloodbath* was used a lot. And then their spiritual leader, Nelson Mandela, was released from the prison where he had been held for twenty-seven years. If anyone had reason to be angry and to exact revenge it was Mandela. And the first thing he did with his freedom was to go to church and to start talking not about revenge but about reconciliation. When apartheid ended and Mandela was elected the first president of a free South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, instead of the usual military courts to punish the oppressors, were founded all over South Africa. The result was amazing, unexpected, hopeful. Just last week I heard the former moderator of the Uniting Presbyterian Church of South Africa and a professor at the University of Praetoria, Maake Makamba, who was visiting Chicago. Addressing the Presbytery of Chicago, he told about being present at a Truth and Reconciliation Commission public meeting that brought together perpetrators and victims of the worst and most brutal violence South African blacks suffered at the hands of whites. A woman, a widow, confronted for the first time a group of young men who, years before, had murdered her husband by pouring gasoline on him and lighting a match. A large crowd was at the hearing and waited in silence for her to speak. She spoke slowly and deliberately. "I have two things to say. I forgive you. And I want you to come with me to the place it happened and I want you to get down on your knees with me and gather up a little of the dirt and ashes and then go with me and help me give him a proper burial." One of the young men said, "I think I will sleep tonight for the first time in years."

He comes to the prisons of guilt and anger.

He comes to be with us in the prisons of addiction or codependence or a relationship that feels like a kind of captivity.

Or the captivity of the materialism. We are inundated in this season with the message of consumerism and its underlying motif—that the purpose of life is to get ahead, to earn more so as to be able to buy more. And so a better job, a raise, a career move begins to dominate us and obsess us and becomes a kind of prison determining how we live and think and where we go and with whom we associate. God comes to release us from that prison too.

He comes to the captivity the prophet talked about—the captivity of brokenheartedness, because someone you love has died.

Or perhaps it's the prison of boredom, or uncertainty, or fear for the future, or the final fear, the final prison, the fear of death itself.

The promise of Advent is that there is one who has not forgotten us, one with love so strong that it comes to us where we are and where our needs are the most urgent, one who comes with love strong enough to make us free again and to teach us in modest, simple ways to give and receive the gift of love and to know therein the deepest meaning of human life—the love of friends, of family, of children and parents and grandparents.

A few years ago a long correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his fiancée, Maria von Wedmeyer, was discovered and released for publication by Maria's family. Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and promising theologian, was in prison for working with the Resistance and participating in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He was executed by the Nazis a few days before the end of the war. His letters and papers from prison have been a bestseller for years. These new letters to Maria, *Love Letters from Cell 92,* are more personal. A portion of his Christmas letter from December 14, 1943, is on the front of the bulletin this morning. A few weeks earlier he had written to Maria:

> By the time you receive this letter it will probably be Advent, a time especially dear to me. A prison cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately insignificant task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the doors being opened from the outside, is far from an inappropriate metaphor for Advent. (p.118)

On a day like today, a week and a half before Christmas, Bonhoeffer wrote:

> Dearest Maria, let us celebrate Christmas. . . . Don't entertain any awful imaginings of me in my cell, but remember that Christ, too, frequents prisons, and that he will not pass me by. (pp. 133-134)

To receive the gift of God's love at Christmas requires only that we slow down and acknowledge our need. To receive the gift of the "freedom of the children of God" requires that we acknowledge that in many ways we are not free.

To receive the gift requires that we step back from the busy, happy activities, breathe deeply and open our hands and hearts, and invite God's love into our lives—and maybe even hum a little Advent tune:

> Come, thou long expected Jesus,
> Born to set thy people free:
> From our fears and sins release us
> Let us find our rest in thee.

Amen.